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ABSTRACT

This paper responds to President Clinton's call for an end to social promotion. The article reports on a study that examined the effects of social promotion on students, looked at alternatives to social promotion, and investigated how teachers in a representative public school district perceive social promotion. Data were gathered from 46 questionnaires filled out by employees of a junior high school in southeast Texas. Most participants reported that they believed that social promotion was practiced in their school district. A majority of the participants did not believe that social promotion either benefited the student or improved self-esteem, and most of them did not endorse the practice of social promotion. Results suggest that social promotion does cause further academic deterioration, confirming earlier studies that showed that students who repeat one or more grades are more likely to drop out of school. Teachers, however, are pressured to pass students so as to alleviate the grade-age problem caused by retention. It is argued that merely abolishing social promotion will not solve the problem. Special programs must be provided for failing students, which means that the educational system as a whole must change its belief system that all children learn at the same rate. (Contains 15 references, 2 tables, and the questionnaire.) (RJM)

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The Social Promotion Epidemic

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EA 029 803

D. Powell

Abstract

This research is in response to the Clinton memorandum concerning social promotion. It also pertains to the basic civil right to a quality public education that will prepare a student for life after high school graduation. The main questions that were addressed in this research are: 1) What is the effect of social promotion on the student? ; 2)Are there alternatives to social promotion?; 3) How do teachers in a representative public school district perceive social promotion? The first two questions were analyzed through qualitative analysis of previous research and literature. The third question was investigated by the use of a questionnaire which was distributed to a Southeast Texas Junior High School. Analysis shows that social promotion does not deteriorate nor enhance a student's self-esteem. The findings concerning whether or not social promotion causes further academic deterioration is that in many cases it does. Further research needs to be done to discern which alternatives are effective in the educational environment. Participants in this questionnaire did believe that social promotion was occurring, they do not agree with it, they feel that it causes further academic deterioration, and that it does not improve a student's self-esteem.

The Social Promotion Epidemic

Introduction

Social promotion has not always been a problem among American schools. In the mid 1800's grade level schools originated. The practice at the time was that the student would stay at a grade level until that level was mastered. In the 1930's schools began to consider the factors of age and maturity in relation to grade levels. By the 1980's the social promotion philosophy began to blossom. The theory is to pass a student based on age, without mastery of academics. By the 1990's the nationwide educational practice of social promotion has reached epidemic proportions.

"The basic theory behind social promotion is simple. It is claimed that if a student is held back more than once they will almost certainly drop out of school and join the dead-beats who roam the streets and fill the jails." (Anonymous, 1996) The problem with social promotion is how to deal with high school graduates who cannot read, do basic mathematics, or even fill out an application. When an adult is functionally illiterate and cannot perform the basic skills necessary to get a job, then our education system has failed that individual.

This research is in response to the Clinton memorandum concerning social promotion. It is also pertaining to the basic civil right to a quality public education

that will prepare a student for life after high school graduation. The main questions that are being addressed in this research are: 1) What is the effect of social promotion on the student?; 2)Are there alternatives to social promotion?; 3) How do teachers in a representative public school district perceive social promotion?

Key Terms

Social promotion is defined as students who are passed from grade to grade often regardless of whether they have mastered required material and are academically prepared to do the work at the next level. (Clinton, 1998)

Retention is defined as retaining a student in the same grade for a second year.

Efficiency principle is defined as using the least amount of energy to produce the desired effect.

IEP is defined as an Individualized Education Plan that states the students present educational level along with goals and objectives for the student.

Enrichment class is defined as any elective class that does not pertain to core subject matter.

Core subject matter is defined as Math, Reading, Science, English, and Social Studies.

Review of the Literature

Social promotion has reached epidemic proportions in the United States. *The*

Economist, a London newspaper, reported that a survey of Texas teachers stated that at least 150,000 students, about 4% of the total number in the state's schools, were socially promoted without meeting basic academic requirements. Other states are also trying to address this serious predicament. In September 1998, California passed legislation curtailing social promotion. (Johnston, 1998)

President Bill Clinton addressed the problem of social promotion when he stated,

That is why I have repeatedly challenged States and school districts to end social promotions - to require students to meet rigorous academic standards at key transition points in their schooling career, and to end the practice of promoting students without regard to how much they have learned. As every parent knows, students must earn their promotion through effort and achievement, not simply by accumulating time in school. (Clinton, 1998)

Social promotion is causing academic deterioration, and denying many students a quality education. The right to a quality public education was best expressed by Bob Chase when he stated, "What do any of these rights mean to an American child or young adult who has been denied a decent education, who is functionally illiterate, who lacks even the most basic math skills?" (Chase, 1997) Schools that pass students who cannot read flunk a basic moral test, and further

deteriorate the education system.

The question: **What is the effect of social promotion on a student?** has been divided into two sub-questions. The first is: How does social promotion affect a student's self-esteem? According to Patricia King the rationale behind social promotion is to avoid injury to the student's sense of self worth and to assume that if promoted, the child can catch up. Repeating a grade is often associated with contributing to a poor self-concept. (Butler, 1990) Joan Butler and Herbert Handley's research indicated that self concepts of children who are not diminished by their repeating a grade. This finding supports the position that children retained in early grades do not suffer personal demoralization in the process.

The second sub-question is: Does social promotion cause further academic deterioration? Though well intended social promotion has been an academic disaster. Many students apply the efficiency principle and determine they have no good reason to complete class assignments, because they will be promoted to high school even if they fail classes. Due to this belief many pupils do not try to improve in the academic areas that they are already behind in. Hall and Wallace reviewed numerous studies and found that students who were retained achieved better grades in high school than those students who were promoted. (Butler, 1990)

The next main question analyzed was: **Are there alternatives to social**

promotion, and if so what are they? Yes, there are alternatives, but first one must realize that there are many factors to consider when students are involved. Children learn at different rates and much of this depends on their home life. A child whose parents did not read to him or her, because they cannot read themselves, will come to school much less prepared than the child who was read to every night. Children who come from stressful home situations or who are tired and hungry also will not learn as fast as a child who is happy and healthy. Students' who move frequently or who are kept out of school for numerous reasons may be more at risk than a student who continues to live in the same school district. (Thomas, 1992)

Many studies have been done to find an answer to the social promotion epidemic. Social promotion does not work, but what does? Governor George W. Bush and President Bill Clinton have gone on record against it, but even they have not been able to create a fool proof alternative that is guaranteed to work. This nation is aware of the problem, but the answer to social promotion continues to escape us. Many alternatives have been suggested, from retention to combining vocational with regular lessons. Before long social promotion may become a catch phrase of the past.

One such alternative is transition classes for pupils who have failed in core subject areas. This method is currently being used in a middle school in Colorado.

The concept is that the transition classes are scheduled not to interfere with regular core subject classes. The transition students stay in step with their peers and proceed on schedule to the next grade level. This strategy avoids some of the harmful effects of both social promotion and retention. The transition classes are scheduled at the same time as enrichment classes. This causes the efficiency principle to work in our favor because the shortest route to returning to the enrichment classes is for students to achieve proficiency in the core subject matter as quickly as possible. The material in the transition class is bundled into independent study units that the students progress through at their own pace. (King and Allen, 1995)

Greensville County, Virginia, initiated a program that completely eliminated social promotion. Greensville attempted to combine the best features of the traditional school system with a program that promoted by achievement. Students who have to be retained are placed with other over age students rather than with students who are taking that grade for the first time. These different classes are assigned to the schools on the basis of age. An example would be younger fifth grade students are assigned to one school and older fifth grade students are assigned to a fifth grade class on a different campus.

At the end of each academic session those students who have mastered the

required academics are placed in the next higher grade level and those students who have not are assigned to the same grade. Greensville also designed an alternative program to provide basic academic skills and job training for those students who lack the interest or ability to follow a strict academic program.

The purpose of this program is to give students job entry skills. Besides learning job skills, the student receives instruction in developmental reading, speaking, writing, consumer math, mathematical measurements, and physical education. Students understand that this program may not lead to a diploma, but they are granted a certificate stating what job-related skills they possess. (Cunningham, 1976)

Retention has been used widely in the United States for many years. Retention has been proven effective when used with students in second grade or below. The younger students do not understand the concepts of flunking or failure so their self esteem is not harmed. In cases where retention has been successful there was some academic progress, good social skills, and maturity increase. Success is more likely to occur with supportive parents who work with their child at home. Parental support is crucial for social and academic gain when a child is retained.

Even though most researchers and educators reject the value of retention they

continue to believe social promotion is not the answer. Let's look at some other alternatives.

*Summer school and after school programs to promote the student on time

*Smaller class size

*Evaluation for learning disabilities

*Identify at-risk students early on, and provide immediate help especially with reading and math

*Give remedial instruction on skills the student has not mastered

*One-on-one tutoring or computer instruction

*Placed in small multi-age groups with similar skill levels

*Incorporate hands-on individualized learning

*Form IEP similar to special education model

Method

Participants

Seventy-three employees of a Southeast Texas Junior High School participated in the questionnaire. The participants were classified as teachers, administration, support staff, and para-professionals. The participants were not paid, and anonymity was maintained.

Materials

The materials used in conducting the survey were a questionnaire (Figure 1), pencil, paper, and a computer with a word processor. The questionnaire was developed using the Likert scale. Other materials used in this project were books, periodicals, journal articles, and memorandums.

Design and Procedure

The research design used is an evaluative-descriptive conglomeration. Qualitative analysis of the Clinton memorandum and previous educational research ascertained the effects of social promotion on the student's self-esteem and academic performance, as well as alternatives to the social promotion epidemic.

The questionnaire was developed using the Likert scale to determine attitudes within the district toward social promotion. The questionnaire was delivered to seventy-three participants through their individual school mailbox. The participants were given one school day to return the completed form to one of the researcher's boxes.

Data Collection

Seventy-three questionnaires were handed out to participants. Forty-six questionnaires were returned. Question one and question two have forty-eight answers, instead of forty-six, due to the fact that two of the participants circled two

answers on these questions. Instead of throwing out these two questionnaires all answers were recorded in Table 1.

Results

Analysis shows that social promotion does not deteriorate nor enhance a student's self-esteem. Therefore the theory of socially promoting a student so that their self concept is not damaged is inaccurate.

The findings concerning whether or not social promotion causes further academic deterioration is that in many cases it does. "The ultimate consequence of social promotion is that the student continues to fall further and further behind. This leaves the student without the skills needed for college and employment." (Clinton, 1998)

Concerning alternatives to social promotion research indicates that ending social promotion by simply retaining students in the same grade is the wrong choice. Students who repeat one or more grades are more likely to drop out of school. Individual districts across the United States are looking into several alternatives to social promotion. Many of these alternatives are being tried in schools across the nation at the present time. Further research needs to be done to discern which alternatives are effective in the educational environment.

The results of the questionnaire are shown in Table 1, and an analysis of who

participated is shown in Table 2. Question one stated, "Do you believe this district practices social promotion?" The results indicated that the majority of participants, thirty-seven, agreed or strongly agreed. Question two asked, "Do you believe that social promotion benefits the student?" Thirty-seven of the participants disagreed with this question. Question three stated, "Do you believe that social promotion improved students self-esteem?" Thirty of the participants disagreed that it improved self-esteem. Question four stated, "Do you believe that social promotion causes further academic deterioration?" Thirty-two of the participants agreed with this question. Question five stated, "Do you agree with the practice of social promotion?" Thirty-five of the participants disagreed with this question. In summary, staff in this district did believe that social promotion was occurring, they do not agree with it, they feel that it cases further academic deterioration, and that it does not improve a student's self-esteem.

Conclusion

"One of the fears about social promotion is that deficient students will be passed on endlessly as if no one had noticed their problem." (Center for Policy Research in Education, 1990) Merely abolishing social promotion will not solve the problem. Unless special programs are provided failing students will simply be recycled. This produces adults who read on an elementary level, while retention

creates seventeen-year-old junior high school students.

It seems that the only way for our students to be successful is for the education system as a whole to change its entire belief system that all children learn at the same rate and will learn certain skills by a certain age. Even though teachers do not agree with the practice of social promotion, it is a double-edged sword. On one hand the pressure is to pass the pupil to alleviate the grade-age problem caused by retention. On the other hand social promotion produces functionally illiterate adults who cannot be successful in their adult life.

The time has come where American educators can no longer afford to ignore the social promotion epidemic sweeping the nation. By ending social promotion we are sending the message that even though schools are responsible for providing every child with a quality public education, the parents and the students are equally as responsible.

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Figure 1:

QUESTIONNAIRE ON SOCIAL PROMOTION

Please complete this questionnaire and return to D. Powell or R. James before 8th period today. This questionnaire is being done as part of a research project at Lamar University. Thank you in advance for your participation.

For purposes of this questionnaire social promotion is defined as the passing of a student from grade level to grade level without mastering required material;

Key:
1-Strongly Agree **2**-Agree **3**-Neutral **4**-Disagree **5**-Strongly Disagree

Please circle the answer which best expresses your belief or feeling on the following questions.

1. Do you believe that this district practices social promotion?
   1 2 3 4 5

2. Do you believe that social promotion benefits the student?
   1 2 3 4 5

3. Do you believe that social promotion improves students self-esteem?
   1 2 3 4 5

4. Do you believe that social promotion causes further academic deterioration?
   1 2 3 4 5

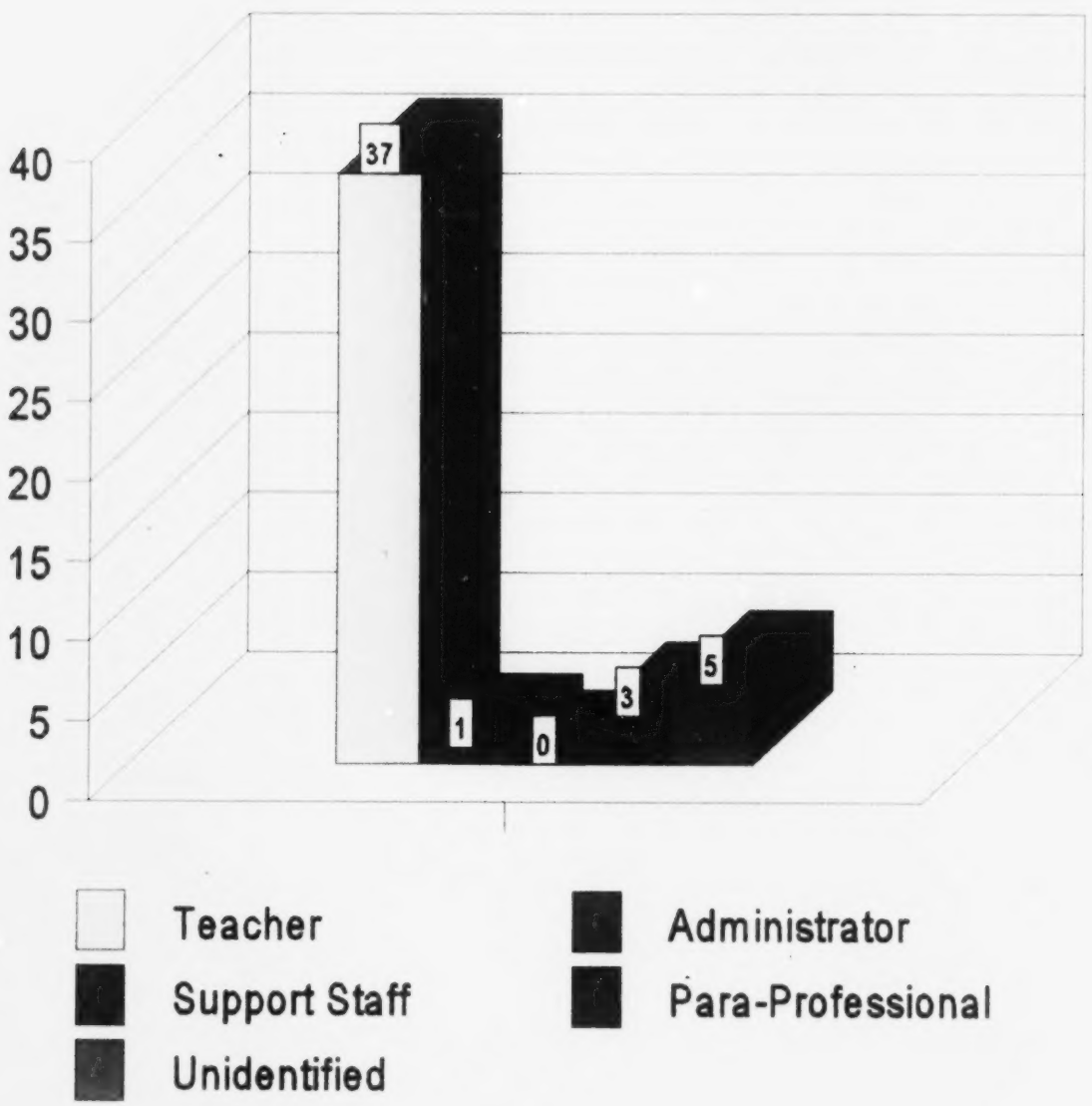
5. Do you agree with the practice of social promotion?
   1 2 3 4 5

Please circle the category which best describes your current career:
Teacher Administrator Support Staff Para-professional

Table 1: Results of Teacher Questionnaire

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Question 1	17	20	6	2	0
Question 2	0	3	8	16	21
Question 3	0	5	11	16	14
Question 4	19	13	5	2	7
Question 5	1	6	4	15	20

Table 2: Job Category (taken from questionnaire)



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